# Imperial policy, provincial practices: Colonial language policy in nineteenth-century India

## Farina Mir

# Imperial policy, provincial practices: Colonial language policy in nineteenth-century India

## Farina Mir

Department of History, University of Michigan

*This article explores three interrelated themes in the history of British colonialism in nineteenth-century India by examining colonial language policy. These themes are: the tensions between imperial and provincial imperatives of colonial rule; the relationship between language and colonial governance; and the limits of colonial power. I argue in particular that the transformation in colonial language policy in the 1830s, from using Persian to using regional vernacular languages in provincial administration, was grounded in an ideology of efficient, just and legitimate rule. This shift to regional vernacular languages was implemented in all Company territories, and became a principle of the Company's rule in India. However, when the Punjab was annexed to the Company in 1849, the regional vernacular (Punjabi) was not adopted as the official language of provincial government. This article examines why language policy in the Punjab was different, arguing that the local contingencies of rule in the region trumped imperial ideology, and then examines the implications of language policy in colonial Punjab. Language policy had a profound impact on indigenous literary practices in colonial Punjab, yet this impact was in no way absolute. In marking out the arenas where colonial language policy reached its limits, this article also considers the limits of colonial power.*

## Introduction

It has long been established that language is a critical arena for the operation of colonial power. Johannes Fabian, for example, has shown that colonial codification,

patronage and indeed appropriation of Swahili in Belgian-controlled Congo during the early decades of the twentieth century was crucial to maintaining colonial control over the indigenous workforce needed to exploit Congo's natural re-sources.[1] C.A. Bayly, in a study focused on late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India, has eloquently argued that a colonial state's ability to access indigenous networks of information and adapt them to its own ends is central to the success (or failure) of colonial ventures.[2] Bayly illustrates that access to information rested on colonial officials' linguistic abilities in Persian, Sanskrit and local vernacular languages. Paradoxically, through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century most colonial officials did not possess these skills, and had to rely instead on na-tive intermediaries and interpreters.

Given the obvious advantages of linguistic competence, East India Company officials took pains to learn, codify and ultimately teach Indian classical and ver-nacular languages in colonial institutions, in both England and India.[3] Bernard Cohn has persuasively argued that such institutions helped colonial officials gain the 'command of language' that was crucial to the consolidation of power in India.[4] Cohn's analysis shows how the colonial production of knowledge about Indian languages, grounded in the assumption of political power, led to the use of a par-ticular register of Hindustani as a 'language of command'.[5] Cohn also documents how colonial perceptions of Indian languages such as Hindustani facilitated early colonial political consolidation more than they reflected indigenous linguistic practices or traditions.

If language is an important arena of colonial power, then an examination of colonial language policy—that is, what languages colonial states adopt for administration—can help elucidate key aspects of colonialism. This article will explore three interrelated themes in the history of British colonialism by examining

---

[1] Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*. Janina Brutt-Griffler has made much the same argument for British Basutoland (Lesotho), and argues that the Sotho people were educated in Zulu in order to maintain their availability as migrant labour for work in South African mines. See her 'Class, Ethnicity, and Language Rights'.

[2] Bayly, *Empire and Information*.

[3] The first such institution was the College of Fort William in Calcutta, founded in 1800. The college offered instruction in both classical (Arabic, Persian and Sanskrit) and vernacular (Tamil, Telegu, Kannada, Marathi, Bengali and Hindustani) languages. See Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts*, p. 25. In 1806, the East India Company established a college at Haileybury, England, for the purpose of educating recruits before they arrived in India. The college emphasised both liberal studies (Classics, Mathematics, Law, Political Economy and History) and Oriental languages. The latter included Arabic, Persian, Sanskrit, Bengali, Telegu, Hindi, Hindustani (likely Urdu) and Marathi. See Lowell, *Colonial Civil Service*, p. 293. In 1812, a second institution was founded in India: the College of Fort St. George in Madras, intended primarily to teach South Indian languages.

[4] Cohn, 'The Command of Language'.

[5] Hindustani, the vernacular language of large parts of north India, primarily refers to a colloquial language. Its written form, when in the Indo-Persian script, is Urdu; when written in the Devnagari script the language is known as Hindi. See Christopher King, *One Language, Two Scripts*.

colonial language policy in nineteenth-century India, particularly the Punjab. These three themes are: (*i*) the tension between imperial and provincial imperatives of rule; (*ii*) the relationship between language and colonial governance; and (*iii*) the limits of colonial power. Each theme reveals specific aspects of Britain's colonial enterprise, and elucidates important dimensions of India's nineteenth-century history. Let me begin by introducing each theme.

The first is the tension between all-India (or 'imperial') imperatives of colonial rule and local (or provincial) circumstances of governance. I will argue that an analysis of colonial language policy in nineteenth-century India reveals that the local and contingent took precedence over imperial imperatives. At times this is difficult to document because the imperatives of local-level rule often harmonised with imperial dictates, and it is difficult to disentangle the role of each in constituting colonial policy. Where they were in conflict, however, the primacy of local concerns becomes apparent. The history of language policy in colonial Punjab that I explore here illustrates this point. Historian Adele Perry has succinctly argued that the colonial state, 'for all its devastating prowess . . . was produced and re-produced not in the hypothetical English mind or even in Whitehall, but under local, colonial circumstances that functioned to condition and sometimes mitigate its authority'.[6] What I aim to show in what follows is not the disjuncture between London and the Government of India in Calcutta, but rather that between Calcutta and those who governed on its behalf at the provincial level.

A second, related theme is the relationship between colonial governance and language. Here, I am particularly interested in the importance colonial officials placed on the use of Indian vernacular languages in administration. This was grounded in colonial officers' conceptions of good governance in India, which incorporated ideas of efficiency, justice and legitimacy. In colonial discourse— whether emanating from London, Calcutta, or India's provinces—it was precisely these political ideals that were supposed to mark the colonial state as different from (and more civilised than) the 'despotic' Asiatic regime(s) it replaced. That colonial officials repeatedly invoked these ideals throughout the nineteenth century speaks to the impact of utilitarianism and liberalism on political thought in both Britain and India.[7] Some have argued that the empire, and India in particular, was a crucible for the practical application of such philosophies before they influenced Britain itself.[8] For our purposes, it will suffice to state that utilitarian and liberal ideologies informed the conception that colonial governance in India had to be efficient and just, and that the colonial state's subjects had to recognise its power as legitimate.

---

[6] Perry, 'The State of Empire'.

[7] On utilitarianism in India, see Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*; on liberalism and empire, Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire*; and on the role of liberalism in constructing British colonialism in India, Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*.

[8] See, in particular, Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*; and Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.

Language, specifically that used for local administration, was seen to be crucial in realising these governmental ideals. From the turn of the nineteenth century onward, colonial officials across India insisted that Indians should be adjudicated (in colonial courts) in languages they understood. Partly this reflected a desire for the efficiency that would come from less translation between vernacular languages and the language of the courts (Persian), but this cannot, by itself, adequately account for the many different quarters from which this demand emanated. A more convincing argument is that the political ideals of just and legitimate governance, alongside efficiency, accounted for the consistency with which colonial officials voiced this demand. One can locate the broad appeal of these particular ideals among colonial officials in the language policy adopted across India with Act No. 29 of 1837, which prescribed provincial-level governance through vernacular languages.

The history of language policy in colonial Punjab presents a counter-example to this trend, however, Colonial language policy in the Punjab instituted Urdu as the official language of the province rather than Punjabi, the region's predominant vernacular language. In so doing, the province adhered to neither imperial language policy nor the political ideologies in which it was grounded. In what follows, I explore how and why language policy in the Punjab strayed from all-India laws, and from the political ideals that sustained the idea of just and legitimate colonial governance. I will argue that throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, the contingencies and specificities of rule at the local level trumped such political ideologies.

A careful examination of language policy in colonial Punjab points to aspects of colonialism that scholars have given insufficient attention. This brings me to my third theme: the limits of colonial power. When the colonial government instituted an official language that was unfamiliar to most Punjabis, its actions had a profound impact on Punjabi society. However, cultural production in the Punjabi language—from print culture to theatre to everyday colloquial language—flourished throughout the late nineteenth century. The continued vitality of such Punjabi arenas, which flourished despite colonial language policy, suggests the limits of colonialism's reach. While such limits are often articulated through the rubric of 'resistance', I will argue that the arena of Punjabi cultural production is best understood as having thrived in relative autonomy from the colonial state. That this relative autonomy was itself produced by colonial language policy is just one of the many ironies of colonialism in nineteenth-century India.

## Language Policy under Company Rule

When the East India Company assumed political authority in the late eighteenth century, its language policy in India mirrored that of its political predecessors in critical respects. Thus, although the Company's administration was conducted in English at the highest levels, the language of provincial administration and, importantly, the courts, was Persian. By the 1830s, however, there was a palpable unease

with this language policy, particularly with the use of Persian in courts. This unease reflected two interrelated concerns: first, that Indians should be adjudicated and ruled in a language they understood; and second, that the Company's rule should be both responsible and efficient. Prompted by the liberal impulse in which both concerns were grounded, the Company in the 1830s replaced Persian with vernacular languages at the provincial level. This critical shift in colonial policy was not altogether surprising, given the nature of early nineteenth-century colonial discourse on vernacular languages.

### A Discourse on Vernacular Languages

Prior to the 1830s, colonial records display little discomfort with using Persian as the language of legal and revenue proceedings; English as the language of administration at higher levels; or Hindustani as the language of the camp, or military. Rather, the records acknowledge that local linguistic practices were complex, and that vernacular languages were critical to effective rule.

The Company's London-based Court of Directors itself made one of the earliest broad pronouncements to this effect. In an 1802 letter to India's Governor General, the Court intimated its view of the role of vernacular languages alongside Persian and Hindustani in colonial governance:

> An intimate acquaintance with the Languages of the Country, and as competent [a] knowledge of the Laws and Regulations . . . are in our opinion most essential qualifications, and indeed indispensable for the conduct of public business in every department of our Government. Of three languages current on the Bengal side of India the Persian and Hindostanny are necessary for the transaction of business in all offices; with respect to the Bengalese or provincial Language . . . we conceive that the knowledge of it will be found indispensibly [sic.] requisite to the provincial Collectors; nor less so to the Civil Judges.[9]

The Court of Directors' pronouncement was written to the Governor General, who was simultaneously chief administrator of the Bengal Presidency and of all British territories in India, but it is unclear as to whether it was specific to Bengal or had broader intentions. Certainly, in its analysis of the situation in Bengal, the Court acknowledged the utility of the Company's existing language policy in which Persian was the official language of courts and revenue proceedings and Hindustani was widely used by Company employees as a 'vehicular' medium of communication between rulers and ruled to facilitate both Company trade and administration.[10] The Court did not think these two languages sufficient for the

---

[9] Court of Directors, letter to Governor General in Council at Fort William in Bengal, 27 Jan. 1802, British Library, London (BL), Oriental and India Office Collections of the British Library (OIOC), F/4/300.

[10] I borrow the term 'vehicular' from Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*, p. 71.

task of administration, however, and in this correspondence placed an unprecedented stress on the 'languages of the country', or vernacular languages. It even went so far as to suggest proficiency in the pertinent vernacular languages as a prerequisite for office.[11] Yet the Court of Directors instituted no ordinance to this effect. Rather, its statement reiterated the Company's early nineteenth-century language policy: Persian was the Company's official language, Hindustani served as a vehicular language in many parts of the subcontinent, and vernacular languages, although they had no official role, were deemed critical to colonial governance.

The impetus to use vernacular languages, if not to officially recognise them, came not only from the Court of Directors in London, but also from officials in India. In some cases, provincial-level officials emphasised vernacular languages as crucial to effective government, in others to just governance, and sometimes both. Two examples, from the Madras and Bombay Presidencies, highlight the perception that vernacular languages were central to the colonial project.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, officials at Fort St. George deemed facility in south Indian vernacular languages essential to Company employees' ability to carry out their duties effectively. Their seriousness of purpose is manifest in an 1805 public notice, which stated that the Company would not 'appoint any Civil Servant to the situation of Judge or Collector, who shall not be found to have made an adequate degree of proficiency in one of the following native languages— Viz. the Tamil, the Telinga [Telegu], the Canarese [Kannada], or the language of the Province of Malabar [presumably Malayalam]'.[12] In relaying this decision to the Court of Directors, Madras officials clearly articulated their opinion of the Company's existing language policy: 'We attached considerable importance to the study of Hindoostanee & Persian Languages, But . . . highly meritorious as we should . . . consider the acquirement of them; We did not deem them so absolutely necessary as the vernacular languages of the Country'.[13] The Court of Directors apparently agreed with this assessment, for it sanctioned the policy. Indeed, so strongly did it favour an emphasis on 'the vernacular languages of the country' that it suggested extending the rule to the Commercial Department, and argued that for the 'intelligent and safe transaction of that department an ability to converse immediately with the Natives is as necessary as in any other'.[14]

Nonetheless, the acquisition of those languages by civil servants lagged. In 1812, a committee appointed to examine junior civil servants in the native languages reported only 'two instances of uncommon proficiency in the Tenegu [sic.] and Tamil, the study of which is . . . much more important than that of any other of the native languages'.[15] This was a cause of concern for Madras officials, and

---

[11] Court of Directors, letter to Governor General in Council at Fort William in Bengal, 27 Jan. 1802, BL, OIOC, F/4/300.

[12] Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George to the Court of Directors, 8 Sept. 1805, BL, OIOC, F/4/300.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] Extract Public Letter to Fort St. George, 23 Oct. 1805, BL, OIOC, F/4/300.

[15] Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George, 10 Jan. 1812, BL, OIOC, F/4/357.

they quickly diagnosed the problem: civil servants were studying Indian languages, but *not* those most necessary for service in the Madras Presidency. Administrators wrote to the Court of Directors, 'The native dialect of the territories subject to the Government of Fort St. George are Tamil, Tenugu [Telegu], Canndi [Kannada] and Malayalmi [Malayalam] . . . yet the study of Persian and of Hindostanee has of late been prosecuted almost to the utter exclusion of the native dialects'.[16]

Officials at Fort St. George advocated two remedies: that south Indian vernacular languages be promoted at the Company's College at Haileybury, and that the existing system of financial rewards for linguistic competence be changed to promote their study. Madras officials recommended that no employee in their Presidency should in future receive the established reward (of 1,000 pagodas) for proficiency in Persian and Hindustani unless he had previously passed an examination in one of the 'Native dialects', and the Court sanctioned this policy.[17] This change in rules is one of many illustrations of the importance Madras Presidency officials attached to acquiring proficiency in vernacular languages. An equally striking example was the establishment of a College at Fort St. George in 1812, the principle goal of which was vernacular language education for Company servants.[18]

Officials in the Madras Presidency were not alone—in other Presidencies, too, vernacular languages were important to discourses on both effective administration and just governance. A memorial placed before the Court of Directors in 1819 accentuates how, for some Company employees, the use of the vernacular was imperative for the latter. The memorial, presented by Bombay's justices, complained of a delay in translating the Police Enactments of the Town and Island of Bombay into the 'native languages'.[19] It recorded the justices' dismay at frequently finding that those brought before them for violation of the Enactments, men who were often 'the best informed and most respectable natives . . . had no knowledge whatever of the existence of the Regulations which they were charged with having violated'.[20] The justices reminded the Court of Directors that the 'original and fundamental Regulation 1 of 1812, for the good order and civil government of the Island of Bombay', had been crafted with great care; and required 'these Rules shall be published and translated into the native languages, and constantly distributed as much as possible'. They noted, 'this injunction seemed to be a dictate . . . of common Justice', yet it had not been complied with, and they ruled that convicting Indians for violating laws that had not been translated into vernacular languages was itself illegal.[21]

The justices' decision brought them into direct conflict with administrative officials in the Bombay Judicial Department, who questioned its justness.[22] The Court

---

[16] Extract Public Letter from Fort St. George, 10 Jan. 1812, BL, OIOC, F/4/357.

[17] *Ibid.*

[18] Blackburn, *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism*, p. 91.

[19] 'Memorial of His Majesty's Justices', BL, OIOC, F/4/638.

[20] *Ibid.*

[21] *Ibid.*

[22] Extract Judicial Letter from Bombay, 1 Nov. 1819, BL, OIOC, F/4/638.

of Directors' correspondence contains no further mention of this issue, so we never learn whether the Court sided with the justices or the administrators. What the memorandum does highlight is a discourse on just governance, and here too, vernacular languages were at the heart of the matter. Legitimate justice could not be rendered if Indians could not understand Company laws. Regardless of whether the emphasis was on just governance, as in the Bombay case, or on the efficient administration of territories, as in Madras, vernacular languages were seen as crucial to attaining desired political ends.

One might think that the colonial government's emphasis on the use of vernacular languages in administering India was simply a matter of expediency, particularly so with the Madras Government's emphasis on effective and efficient administration. After all, a government with such qualities would best accomplish the Company's political, and perhaps more importantly, economic goals. However, more was seen to be at stake here than simple expediency. In fact, the Company's turn to vernaculars was grounded as much in political ideals as in notions of expedient colonial rule. Put another way, the acquisition and use of vernaculars by the Company was critical to the *type* of government it envisioned. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, Company officials regarded as crucial an ability to communicate with the natives they ruled over. Communication was critical to the evolving theory of the Company state, now engaged not only with trade, but with promulgating new laws, understanding court testimony, and communicating with predominantly peasant subjects. Vernacular languages were thought crucial to each of these tasks.

Yet, though both the Court of Directors in London and officials on the ground in India highlighted the governmental importance of vernacular languages, official language policy was not changed. In the early nineteenth century, rules about vernacular language proficiency were instituted on an ad hoc basis, and always in addition to, rather than in place of, existing language policy. The reasons for this are not entirely clear. We can speculate that despite the colonial state's political aggressiveness at this stage in its history, it was disinclined to institute major ruptures in administrative practices in regions where it was consolidating its power. Moreover, colonial institutions that could provide adequate training to officials were just being established, and it would be some time before a cadre of capable officers were available. Whatever the reason, in the early nineteenth century the Company continued to formally support Persian, and informally Hindustani, even as it rhetorically stressed that India's vernacular languages were also important.

### Officially Instituting the Vernacular: Act No. 29 Of 1837

By the 1830s, a decisive shift had taken place in colonial attitudes towards language policy in India. Persian had been officially abandoned by 1832 in the Bombay and Madras Presidencies,[23] and by 1837 in the Bengal Presidency. In the latter,

---

[23] In the Madras Presidency, Tamil, Telegu, Kannada, Malayalam and, in some of its northern reaches, Marathi were used as administrative languages in lieu of Persian. In Bombay presidency,

language policy was changed only after a prolonged debate, one that highlights the ideological concerns that prompted the shift. As we will see, the change was grounded in ideas circulating in Britain and India at the time about the nature of just governance, honest administration and efficiency. An 1835 letter from the Court of Directors to the Bengal Judicial Department argued for abandoning Persian, and points to each of these concerns. They wrote that the use of Persian in judicial proceedings 'forms a barrier between the European functionaries and the Natives: it multiplies facilities for dishonest practices on the part of the Native Officers attached to our courts [and it] embarrasses the transaction of every description of the business'.[24] The Court's tone here signalled a change in how Indian language policy was perceived.

Persian was now viewed as an impediment to good governance. This is readily apparent in an 1836 minute by Governor General Auckland. He noted that Persian was not the colloquial language in any part of Company territory; to retain it as the language of the courts, therefore, was to keep 'the bulk of the people in ignorance of the Judicial proceedings which they may hear or to which they may be parties'.[25] Auckland noted that this left Company subjects with no means to check those proceedings or appreciate the court's impartiality.[26] The obvious remedy was to abolish Persian in the Bengal Presidency, where it was still the official language of the courts and revenue proceedings. But what language should or could replace it?

To answer that question, the Company canvassed the opinions of district commissioners in Bengal and judges subordinate to them.[27] Most strongly opposed replacing Persian with the vernacular languages spoken in the Bengal Presidency—Bengali, Oriya and Hindustani, spoken in the central/eastern, southern and western portions, respectively. Their opposition converged on what they saw as deficiencies in vernacular languages, particularly vis-à-vis Persian. They charged that vernacular languages were: not standardised,[28] 'uncouth',[29] 'barren' and 'unadapted to the conduct of judicial proceedings'.[30] Vernacular languages were also deemed less efficient than Persian.[31] These officers also feared that a change from Persian

---

Gujarati and Marathi were instituted as the administrative languages. King, *One Language, Two Scripts*, p. 54; Srivastava, *Development of Judicial System in India*, pp. 107–8.

[24] Board of Control, letter to Judicial Department (No. 1 of 1835), 26 June 1835, BL, OIOC, General Correspondence, E/4/744.

[25] 'Minute by the Right Honourable The Governor General', 25 Sept. 1836, BL, OIOC, F/4/1684.

[26] *Ibid.*

[27] Based on the responses recorded in BL, OIOC, F/4/1684, all those canvassed were British officials.

[28] This was said of Hindi in particular. See J.R. Davidson, letter to J.F.M. Reid, Registrar of the Court of Sudder Dewany Adawlut, [Fort William], 7 Mar. 1836, BL, OIOC, F/4/1684.

[29] This was said of Oriya in particular. See H. Ricketts, letter to [J.F.M. Reid], the Registrar of the Court of the Sudder Dewany Adawlut, Fort William, 19 Feb. 1836, BL, OIOC, F/4/1684.

[30] This was said of Bengali in particular. See R. Barlow, letter to J.F.M. Reid, Registrar of the Court of Sudder Dewany Adawlut, [Fort William], 23 Apr. 1836, BL, OIOC, F/4/1684.

[31] This was said of all three languages. See Davidson to Reid (note 28), Ricketts to Reid (note 29), and Barlow to Reid (note 30).

would be extremely detrimental to colonial administration because, in the words of one official, finding 'competent officers to carry on the business of the courts' would be impossible.[32] Nevertheless, some officers (a decided minority) felt, 'the advantage to the people of having justice administered to them in their own tongue' outweighed all other considerations.[33] This argument had been raised before without effect, but now it carried the day. This was despite the misgivings of the many colonial officers who thought that vernacular languages were ill-suited to administrative purposes, misgivings that highlight the tension between imperial ideology and the attitudes of officials working at the provincial, and in this case district, level in India.

In a resolution dated 4 September 1837, the Governor General declared

'it to be just and reasonable that those Judicial and Fiscal Proceedings on which the dearest interest of the Indian people depend should be conducted in a language which they understand . . . [He] is therefore disposed . . . to substitute the Vernacular languages of the country for the Persian in legal proceedings and in proceedings relating to the revenue'.[34]

The Resolution was passed in November as Act No. 29 of 1837, and Persian was officially replaced.[35] Act 29 itself directly affected only the Bengal Presidency (the Madras and Bombay Presidencies had already abandoned Persian). There, Bengali, Oriya and Urdu (or Hindustani in Indo-Persian script) were designated as official languages of courts and revenue proceedings in those areas where they predominated. However, Act 29 was significant far beyond Bengal because it was an all-India Act, and as such set a precedent for future language policy throughout India. It ensured that from 1837 on, vernacular languages would be the medium of colonial governance at all but the highest levels.

Although Company officials in England and India had emphasised the importance of vernaculars since the turn of the nineteenth century, Act 29 represented a crucial moment in colonial language policy. As an all-India regulation, Act 29 gave the Company's Indian territories a uniform policy that sought, at least rhetorically, to bring the language of local administration into line with each region's

---

[32] J.R. Davidson, letter to J.F.M. Reid, Registrar of the Court of Sudder Dewany Adawlut, [Fort William], 7 Mar. 1836, BL, OIOC, F/4/1684.

[33] 'Minute by the Honourable A. Ross', 29 Sept. 1836, BL, OIOC, F/4/1684.

[34] 'Resolution of the Governor General', Political Department, 4 Sept. 1837, BL, OIOC, F/4/1684.

[35] For the full text of the Act, see BL, OIOC, India Office Records Official Publications Series, V/8/31 (*India Acts 1834–1840*). Christopher King points out that in response to complaints from Indians about this change in language policy, the state retracted somewhat and allowed Persian to serve as one of the official languages of administration. See *One Language, Two Scripts*, p. 58. This concession did not, however, undermine the fundamental change in policy that had taken place, and the precedent that was set by Act 29 with regard to future language policy in British India.

spoken language. The Act therefore addressed the primary concern of those colonial officials who championed it: that Indians should be administered and adjudicated in languages they themselves understood and used.[36]

The principal reason posited for changing language policy was a concern that the Company's rule be 'just' and 'reasonable'—terms used in the resolution that preceded Act 29. However, more pragmatic concerns were also at play. Correspondence in the years leading up to the Act shows that the Court of Directors believed a shift from Persian to vernacular languages would be financially expedient (because it would eliminate the need for translation between vernacular languages and Persian).[37] For the most part the Government of India denied that such considerations were at play. Governor General Auckland, in a 1836 minute on language policy, distanced himself from questions of financial concern: 'I have omitted to call attention to the question of expence [sic.],' he wrote, 'for in the small degree in which expenditure is likely to be affected by the change, this is but a very subordinate consideration compared to others'.[38] The record nevertheless reflects a greater concern with economic efficiency than Auckland suggests.[39]

I raise the issue of fiscal efficiency because it highlights ambivalence in colonial policies. If we examine only the stated reasons for the new language policy, ideology appears to play the central role. On the other hand, if we privilege the Court of Directors' financial concerns, then we perceive a desire for economy to be the catalyst for change. However, if we analyse both together, we can grasp the constant tension in the colonial enterprise between ideologically informed policies and the exigencies of rule.

---

[36] There was, of course, a discrepancy between colonial intent and practice. The intent of Act 29 was to make the language of government accessible to Indians. In practice, this effort was mitigated in at least two ways. One, when the state chose a language for local administration, it necessarily privileged one dialect. People's ability to understand or use the administrative language therefore depended on the relationship between their dialect and that chosen by the state. See King, *One Language, Two Scripts*, p. 7. The second mitigating factor was that the language of the courts, despite a change to the vernacular, often remained inaccessible to the majority of people because it was heavily laden with terms and vocabulary far removed from everyday language. See Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, p. 177.

[37] Court of Directors, letter to Judicial Department, Bengal (No. 1 of 1835), 26 June 1835, BL, OIOC, General Correspondence, E/4/744.

[38] 'Minute by the Right Honourable The Governor General', 25 Sept. 1836, BL, OIOC, F/4/1684.

[39] Here I have pointed to the influence of financial concerns on language policy. One could also note the colonial state's pragmatic policy of fostering native intermediaries. Bernard Cohn, in 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', underscores this policy as crucial to colonial rule in the Victorian period. One can also highlight the cultivation of intermediaries as a critical aspect of Company politics, though the key intermediaries in this earlier period were merchant classes such as 'banians' (traders) and 'dubashes' (interpreters), rather than landed elites (Neild-Basu, 'The Dubashes of Madras'). While I cannot examine the role of language policy in this political process at an all-India level in detail here, I will return to it presently in my analysis of language policy in colonial Punjab.

## Language Policy in Colonial Punjab

Tensions between ideology and practice become still more palpable when we turn our focus to the Punjab, where provincial authorities implemented a language policy that was at odds with that established by Act 29. An analysis of colonial language policy there reveals that although provincial officials were sympathetic to the ideology that underlay Act 29—ideas of 'just', 'legitimate' and 'efficient' government—the local administrative context compelled them to institute a policy that strayed from those political principles.

The East India Company annexed the Punjab in 1849 after it wrested control from the Sikh Kingdom of Ranjit Singh and his descendants.[40] The Company had prevailed only with considerable difficulty, and sustained heavy casualties in two wars with the Sikhs prior to annexation (1845–46; 1848–49). The difficulty with which Punjab became part of the Company state contributed to its unique political structure. For the first years of colonial rule the Punjab was not incorporated into one of India's existing three presidencies, but rather was governed by a three-member 'Board of Administration', responsible directly to the Governor General in Calcutta. The Punjab Board of Administration maintained a highly centralised hold on power at the provincial level, and worked assiduously to assimilate the Punjab into the broader structures of Company rule.

The Punjab Board was also responsible for choosing the province's language of administration. According to the precedent set by Act 29, the Board should have chosen Punjabi. Colonial sources, as I document below, identified Punjabi (or dialects of Punjabi) as the language spoken by a majority of the province's inhabitants, but the Board instead chose Urdu as the official administrative language. Urdu was undoubtedly a vernacular language, and therefore it upheld the letter of the law, but it was primarily the vernacular language of the adjoining North Western Province (NWP), not the Punjab—the choice thus clearly contravened the spirit of Act 29. What motivated the Punjab Board's choice? What were its consequences for Punjabi society? What does it reveal about colonialism and its limits at this juncture? The remainder of this article addresses these questions.

### Establishing Language Policy in Colonial Punjab

One of the first responsibilities of Punjab's Board of Administration was to designate the language of provincial administration. The Board held no clear preconceived position on the matter, and observed only that the 'adoption of one uniform language for all courts and official documents in the Districts under the Board

---

[40] Punjab as an administrative unit of the East India Company's territories consisted of: (*i*) the area immediately south of the Sutlej River (the cis-Sutlej territory); (*ii*) the area between the Sutlej and the Indus Rivers; (*iii*) the area of Dera Ghazi Khan (trans-Indus); and (*iv*) the frontier areas of Peshawar, Leia and Hazara. In 1858, Delhi and its western environs were added to the Punjab. In 1901, the frontier areas were separated to form the North Western Frontier Province. When I refer to Punjab in what follows, I principally mean the area's five *doab*s, or inter-riverine tracts, and the cis-Sutlej territory.

presents obvious advantage'.[41] To reach its decision the Board canvassed senior officers in the six divisions under its jurisdiction, and asked them what language was 'best suited for the courts and Public Business' in their respective areas.[42]

Their responses split the area into two linguistic halves. Officials in the area's western half, which included the western portions of the Punjab and frontier areas (today the North West Frontier Province of Pakistan), suggested that Persian be retained.[43] In contrast, officials in the eastern half of the province suggested a shift to Urdu. Despite the Board's desire to adopt a single language, it concurred with the opinions of its officers and in September 1849 instituted a two-language policy for the province.[44] Urdu was instituted as the official language of courts in eastern Punjab, and Persian in the west and frontier areas.[45]

The Board's decision was sanctioned even though Persian was not a spoken vernacular in any part of the Punjab, and the same was largely true of Urdu.[46] Although in some parts of India colonial linguistic knowledge at this stage was something of a developed science, such knowledge was rudimentary in those areas only recently brought under colonial control.[47] Nonetheless, linguistic information then available to colonial officials identified Punjabi as the spoken language of much of the territory under the Punjab Board's purview.

Perhaps the most important source on Indian linguistic practices and languages in the early nineteenth century was the Serampore Mission in Bengal.[48] Its missionaries devoted themselves to the study of Indian languages as part of their

[41] Secretary to the Board of Administration Punjab, letter to the Commissioners and Superintendents: (*i*) Lahore Division; (*ii*) Multan Division; (*iii*) Leia Division; (*iv*) Jhelum Division; and the Deputy Commissioners: (*i*) Peshawar Division; (*ii*) Hazara Division, 1 June 1849, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 4. The Punjab Board of Administration's correspondence on language policy, archived in the Punjab Provincial Archives (Lahore), has been published in this volume.

[42] Secretary to the Board of Administration Punjab, letter to the Commissioners and Superintendents, 1 June 1849, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 5.

[43] In continuity with Mughal administrative practice, the Sikh state (1799–1849) had retained Persian as the language of administration.

[44] H.M. Elliot, Secretary to the Government of India with the Governor General, letter to the Board of Administration for the Affairs of the Punjab, 6 Sept. 1849, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 25.

[45] Urdu was made the official language of courts in the Lahore and Jhelum districts, and in the northeastern reaches of the Multan Division, as well as in southeastern Punjab. Persian was retained as the official language of judicial records in Multan city, as well as in the Leia, Peshawar and Hazara Divisions. Secretary to the Board of Administration for Punjab, letter to H.M. Elliot, Secretary to the Government of India with the Governor General, 17 Aug. 1849, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, pp. 22–24.

[46] It must be noted that Urdu was the language of Delhi and its environs, but these areas were added to the Punjab in 1858 after language policy had been established.

[47] On philology as a science in India, see Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*.

[48] This is not to discount the work of the early Orientalists and their philological endeavours in India. For a detailed analysis of the work of early Orientalist scholars, see Trautmann, *Aryans and British India*. On the Serampore mission of the Baptist Missionary Society, established in 1800 by William Carey, Joshua Marshman and William Ward, see Potts, *British Baptist Missionaries in India, 1793–1837*.

evangelical mission. Their knowledge allowed them to communicate directly with Indians in their own tongue, to translate the Bible into local languages, and to produce philological materials that were used by other missionaries—and very often Company employees—to learn Indian languages.[49] As early as 1812 the mission had published the first Punjabi grammar, which laid the foundation for all future philological studies of the language.[50] A decade later, in 1822, the Baptist Missionary Society published a language map of India based on information compiled by the Serampore missionaries. The map, the earliest of its kind, contains an astonishing level of detail about languages spoken in the Punjab, particularly considering its early date (Figure 1).

The map covers the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent (including Nepal and Ceylon, or Sri Lanka), and documents the presence of 47 different spoken languages. It divides the Punjab into various linguistic zones, showing 'Punjabee' as the language of central Punjab, 'Mooltanee or Wuch' as the spoken language of southern Punjab, and 'Hurriana' as the language of eastern Punjab. The map thus documents two important facts about the area's linguistic practices: first, neither Persian nor Urdu is shown as a spoken language there, and second, the languages identified on the map as spoken in the region are all closely related; they can be understood as being on a continuum comprised of a single linguistic field: Punjabi.[51]

The missionary knowledge of the Punjabi language and where it was spoken was clearly accessible to colonial authorities. William Carey (author of the first Punjabi grammar) taught at the Company's College at Fort William beginning in 1801. The Serampore language map was published in Britain and would have been readily available to Company authorities. The activities of members of the American Presbyterian Mission at Ludhiana were also well-known to Company officials. In 1851, for example, the Punjab Government sought out Revs Forman and Newton of the Mission for their Punjabi expertise.[52]

---

[49] The Serampore missionaries were not alone in their philological zeal. On the knowledge of native languages as a critical aspect of missionary activities in the modern colonial world, see Fabian, *Language and Colonial Power*; and Comaroff and Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution*, Ch. 6.

[50] Carey, *A Grammar of the Punjaubee Language*.

[51] The Serampore missionaries were not the only ones to create and circulate knowledge about Punjabi in the first half of the nineteenth century. Missionaries at the American Presbyterian Mission at Ludhiana (established in 1834) identified Punjabi as the spoken language of the area and published grammars, dictionaries and guides of the language that would be held as the standard works for their generation. See Shaw, 'The First Printing Press in the Panjab'. Later colonial philologists would map the Punjab differently, though their revisions did not fundamentally alter the fact that Punjabi was the spoken language of the majority of the region's inhabitants. George Grierson, for example, reorganised the Punjab into two linguistic zones in his *Linguistic Survey of India* (1903–28): Punjabi, and what Grierson described as a series of its dialects (one of which was the 'Mooltanee' cited in the Baptist Missionary Society language map as a separate language), was identified as spoken in the eastern half of the province, while Lehnda, a language very closely associated with Punjabi, was given as the language of the western half of the province. See Grierson, *Grierson on Punjabi*.

[52] National Archives of India, New Delhi (NAI), Foreign, Foreign Consultations, Nos 82 and 83, 14 Nov. 1851.

**Figure 1**
*A Language Map of India. Published in Seventh Memoir Respecting
the Translations of the Sacred Scriptures into the Languages of India,
Conducted by the Brethren at Serampore, London, 1822.*
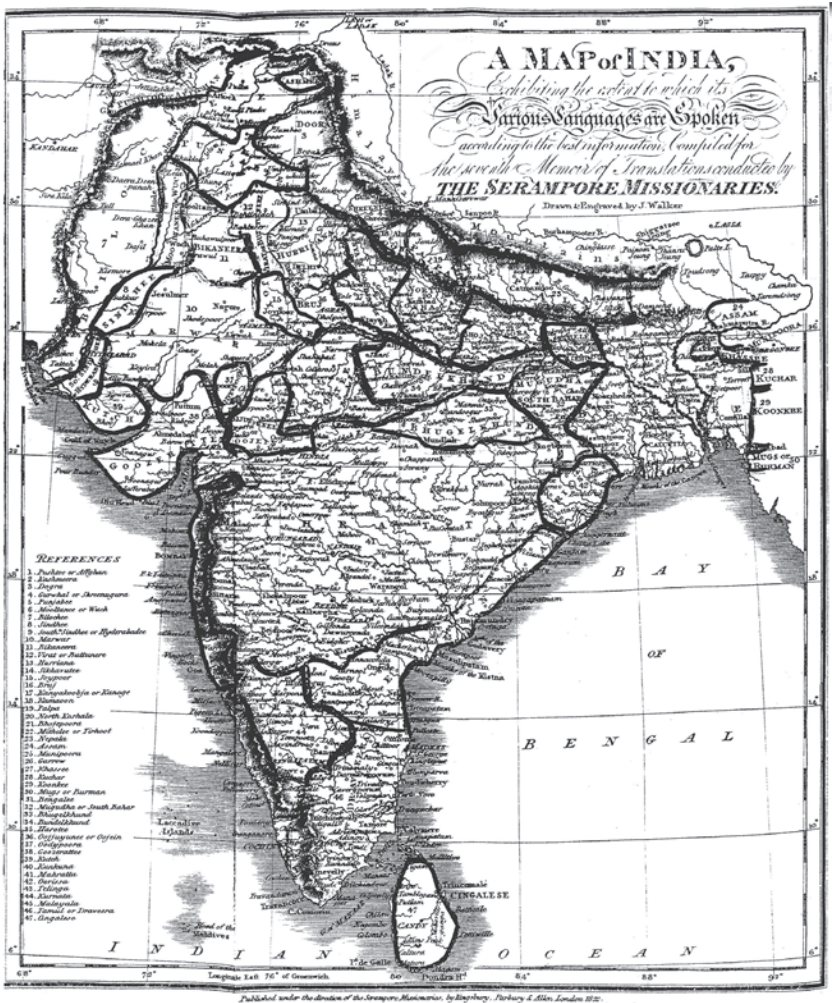


The bottom line is that the Company officials who instituted Punjab's language policy were clearly aware that neither of the languages they chose for state purposes was the spoken language of the area. The order that confirmed Persian and Urdu as the court languages in the area under the Board's control had an important and revealing caveat:

> The only exception that is allowed to this order is in regard to the confession of Prisoners in Criminal cases which the Board direct shall always be recorded

in their own words no matter of what dialect. Translation into Oordoo or Persian . . . being made of such confessions for record with them.[53]

This suggests that the Punjab Board recognised the gulf between the language people spoke and the languages it had chosen for local administration. A statement by John Lawrence, the Board's president, provides further confirmation that the Board was aware of this gulf. Not long after the language policy went into effect, Lawrence wrote that, 'it should be considered that the Urdu is not the language of these Districts [and] neither is Persian'.[54]

Lawrence's comment notwithstanding, from 1849 to 1854 both Urdu and Persian served as colonial Punjab's official languages. In 1854, the language policy abruptly changed. The change was prompted not by a desire to implement a policy better suited to the linguistic practices of the region's inhabitants, but because some civil servants were afraid of losing their jobs, and with good cause. In November 1854, a mandatory civil service exam was announced which, for the first time, required that all candidates pass a test in the official language of the courts in which they were employed. It is apparent from their response to the announcement that many officials employed in the western reaches of the Punjab were not fluent in Persian and relied on interpreters—under the new rules, therefore, they would have to be dismissed. Facing termination, officers in districts where Persian was the language of the courts petitioned the Board to institute Urdu in its place, in the belief that Urdu could more easily be mastered and, thus, positions be retained.[55] The petitions were entirely persuasive; each request to replace Persian was granted. Undoubtedly, the fear of losing personnel rather than any reconsideration of the merits of its language policy had prompted the Board's decision. In any case, this 1854 change made Urdu the official vernacular of the courts in every district under the Board's purview, and gave it the uniform language policy it had advocated in 1849.

Colonial language policy in the Punjab would have been unremarkable were it not for the existence of Act 29, which ensured that vernacular languages would be used in provincial administration in Company territories. The policy instituted by the Board in 1849 was in clear contravention of Act 29, since it retained Persian as the language of the courts (in half of the area it administered). The 1854 decisions to replace Persian with Urdu, however, rectified that discrepancy. Although the

---

[53] Secretary to the Board of Administration Punjab, letter to Commissioner and Superintendent, Multan Division, 20 Sept. 1849, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, pp. 26–27.

[54] Note by Sir John Lawrence, appended to Secretary to the Board of Administration Punjab, letter to Commissioner and Superintendent, Multan Division, 20 Sept. 1849, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 28.

[55] Lieutenant F.R. Pollock, Officiating Deputy Commissioner, Dera Ghazi Khan, letter to Major D. Ross, Commissioner and Superintendent, Leia Division, 8 June 1854, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 32.

choice of Urdu as the Punjab's administrative language was in keeping with the letter of the law (since Urdu was an Indian vernacular language), it hardly followed the spirit of Act 29 because it was not the Punjab's vernacular language. We must recall that Act 29 had largely been motivated by political ideals that insisted on Indians being governed in and through a language they understood and spoke.

Given the Board's actions, one could surmise that it perhaps didn't hold the same political ideas about the importance of vernacular languages in colonial governance that had prompted Act 29. However, in corresponding with the Governor General on the subject of Punjab's language policy in August 1849, the Board stated that choosing the language that was best suited for the public as the language of the courts was 'of great importance as on the selection of the language best suited to the people and at the same time adopted to public business will depend . . . the efficiency of the Civil Revenue and Criminal Courts'.[56] What, then, prompted the Board to choose a language other than Punjabi as the Punjab's administrative language? The Board never gave a justification for its language policy, but the colonial record points to several motivations, each of which suggests that local contingencies of rule were considered more pressing than a political ideology that stressed the state's ability to communicate directly with its subjects and, critically, allowed subjects to communicate directly with the state.

### Colonial Rationales for Punjab's Language Policy

One key reason that the Board instituted Urdu (and initially Persian as well) was so that it could assemble a cadre of trained administrative personnel. In the years immediately following annexation, British and Indian personnel who had served the Company in the North Western and other provinces filled out the ranks in Punjab's administration. Historian Kenneth Jones writes, 'annexation of the Punjab created an immediate need for trained subordinates to staff the new provincial government', and that the Indians among them were primarily from Bengal and the NWP.[57] These men had no knowledge of Punjabi as their vernacular languages were Bengali and Hindustani. They had a working knowledge of Urdu and Persian, however, and this made their transition to colonial service in the Punjab seamless. Similarly, British officers who took up positions knew no Punjabi, but had a working knowledge of Urdu and, in some cases, a rudimentary knowledge of Persian.[58] By using Urdu and Persian in the courts, the Company was able to fill clerical positions immediately with experienced and trusted employees.

---

[56] Secretary to the Board of Administration for Punjab, letter to H.M. Elliot, Secretary to the Government of India with the Governor General, 17 Aug. 1849, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 22.

[57] Jones, *Arya Dharm*, p. 13.

[58] Training in these languages was offered at the Company's colleges at Haileybury and Fort William.

An additional reason for promoting Urdu was that it was widely spoken through-out north India. With Act No. 29 of 1837, Hindustani was declared the administrative language in Bihar, the NWP and parts of the Central Provinces.[59] The script used was Indo-Persian, and this made the 'Hindustani' of much of north India coterminous with the language referred to as 'Urdu' in the Punjab. In light of the widespread use of Urdu/Hindustani, John Lawrence went so far as to refer to it as the '*lingua franca*' of India, an idea that had circulated in colonial circles for some time.[60] By including the Punjab in the area using this *lingua franca*, colonial officials were able to bring administrative continuity to their north Indian territories. This political motivation is evident in the statement of one official who recommended the use of Urdu in the Punjab based on its merit as a 'common medium of intercourse with the other parts of the country'.[61] The application of a common language to align administrative practices in the Punjab with those of previously held territories was one way of facilitating the region's integration into the Company's Raj.

Both these arguments in favour of Urdu—that it would facilitate administration and that it was, some believed, India's *lingua franca*—help explain why the Company chose Urdu as the official vernacular. But perhaps as important as Urdu's perceived advantages were the seeming disadvantages of using Punjabi, of which two stand out—one political in nature, the other philological.

Among the Company's most serious political concerns in the mid-nineteenth century were the military threats it perceived from within and beyond its borders. From within, the Company feared a military uprising by the recently defeated forces of the Sikh Kingdom. The colonial state's trepidation concerning the 'Sikh Nation' is crucial to understanding its language policy in the Punjab—its perception of Punjabi as a Sikh language, in conjunction with its fears of a Sikh resurgence, help explain why Punjabi was sidelined for Urdu.

The identity of Punjabi as the Sikh language had been established in the early nineteenth century and was grounded in two facts: that Gurmukhi was the script of all Sikh sacred scriptures, and that Punjabi was overwhelmingly the Sikhs' colloquial language. As the colonial state came to understand Sikhism, Punjabi was determined to be the Sikh liturgical language, though this was something of a misidentification. Sikh sacred scripture (e.g., the *Adi Granth*, the *Dasam Granth*, the *Janam Sakhis*) includes writings and compositions in a variety of Indian languages, but is always recorded in the Gurmukhi script, which was created by the Sikh Gurus to record their Punjabi compositions. Therefore, Gurmukhi is closely associated with both the Sikh Gurus and the Punjabi language. In both missionary and Company understandings of the Sikh textual/linguistic/script terrain, an

---

[59] Dalmia, *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, p. 176.

[60] Note by Sir John Lawrence, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 28.

[61] Edward Thornton, Commissioner and Superintendent, Jhelum Division, letter to G.J. Christian, Secretary to the Board of Administration for the affairs of the Punjab, 4 July 1849, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 10.

absolute association of the Gurmukhi script with the Punjabi language emerged very early. This, in turn, contributed to the identification in colonial discourse of Punjabi as *the* sacred language of Sikhs.

In addition to being understood as the Sikh sacred language, Punjabi was also identified as the Sikhs' colloquial language. While the former was only partially correct, the latter was more firmly grounded in fact since, historically, the vast majority of Sikhs were native Punjabi speakers. For the colonial state, as well as the Christian missionaries who tried to convert Sikhs, this confluence of sacred and spoken language made the association between Punjabi and Sikhism absolute. This association influenced language policy because the Company felt both militarily and politically vulnerable to the Sikhs in the wake of its conquest of the Punjab.

Despite its victories in the Anglo-Sikh wars, the Company felt little confidence in its control over the Punjab. Its insecurity is manifest in a November 1849 report by Charles Napier, Commander-in-Chief of Company forces: 'The Punjaub has been occupied by our troops but it is not conquered. . . . We now occupy it with 54,000 fighting men and it is at present very dangerous ground.' Napier's fear was grounded in his belief that there were 100,000 Sikh soldiers in the Punjab, whose 'courage has been no way abated by the last struggle' and who he thought 'may some day unexpectedly use it' against the Company.[62]

Napier's fears bear directly on the language policy implemented by the Company state. Given the colonial apprehension of Punjabi as the Sikhs' language, to institute Punjabi as the language of state could have provided a fillip to Sikh political aspirations. While colonial records do not explicitly state this, they repeatedly assert both the colonial understanding of Punjabi as the language of Sikhs and fears of a Sikh resurgence. If political concerns about Sikh resurgence suggested that Punjabi should be suppressed, then colonial attitudes about its lack of merit as a language helped justify implementing such a strategy.

Colonial officers were concerned for a host of reasons that Punjabi was incapable of serving as an administrative language. Their attitudes towards Punjabi were based on misconceptions about the Punjabi linguistic and literary tradition. Although philological opinions about Punjabi are hinted at in archival materials from the earliest years of colonial rule in the Punjab, they are most explicit in a series of correspondence from the early 1860s. This correspondence dates from a period after language policy had already been established in the Punjab; however, we can surmise that the attitudes it expresses formed a continuum with ideas established during the colonial state's earliest experience of rule there.

Foremost among officials' opinions about Punjabi was that it was not a language at all, but 'merely a *patois* of the Urdu'.[63] Unlike classical languages such

---

[62] Charles Napier, 'Report by Lt-Gen Sir Charles Napier', 27 Nov. 1849, BL, OIOC, ms. EUR/ C123.

[63] Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, letter to the Commissioners of Divisions. Cited in 'Abstract of Opinions Regarding Vernacular of the Courts', Lahore, 21 Feb. 1863, NAI, Home, Education, No. 30, Sept. 1876.

as Sanskrit or Persian that were held in high esteem, or vernaculars such as Urdu, Tamil, or Gujarati that were used for official purposes, Punjabi was represented as a derivative dialect. One official compared language practices in the Punjab and England to illustrate this point:

> Punjabee, Derajatee and Mooltanee [the latter two spoken in southwestern and southern Punjab, respectively] are not languages any more than Yorkshire or Somersetshire is a language, and the Indian law no more requires evidence to be taken down in the *patois* of Amritsar, Dera Ghazi Khan, &c., than the English law requires a Londoner's plea to be written without h's.[64]

Other objections were raised on the grounds that there was no established 'standard' Punjabi. 'There is no one standard Punjabee to fix as the language of the courts,' one official argued, because, 'there are wide points of divergence between the *patois* of the tribes of the Ravee and that of those of the Sutlej'.[65] On this same basis, another official argued that 'Punjabi is not . . . a language suited for public record'.[66] Criticism of Punjabi included the language's perceived inherent incapacity for official uses because it 'would be inflexible and barren, and incapable of expressing nice shades of meaning and exact logical ideas with the precision so essential in local proceedings'.[67]

Some officials rested their arguments against Punjabi on the language's lack of written uniformity. Punjabi was written in both the Gurmukhi and Indo-Persian scripts, the latter being the same script that was used for Persian and Urdu. One official erroneously argued that 'Punjabee could not be written in the Persian character'.[68] Some officials even asserted that they could point to no tradition of writing in Punjabi at all. For example, Colonel Hamilton, Commissioner of Multan, wrote, 'the Punjabee has never been a written language in the Mooltan division. It is doubtful whether a man could be procured in the division who could write Punjabee correctly in any character.'[69] Not all officials shared such misconceptions and biases, but they were prevalent enough to significantly contribute to a policy that sidelined Punjabi in favour of Urdu.

---

[64] Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, letter to the Commissioners of Divisions. Cited in 'Abstract of Opinions Regarding Vernacular of the Courts', Lahore, 21 Feb. 1863, NAI, Home, Education, No. 30, Sept. 1876.

[65] *Ibid*.

[66] Officiating Commissioner Dera Ghazi Khan, letter to the Secretary to the Government Punjab, 3 July 1862, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 63.

[67] Captain Maxwell, Deputy Commissioner Googaira, letter to Lt. Col. G.W. Hamilton, Commissioner and Superintendent, Mooltan Division, 23 June 1862, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 61.

[68] Captain Maxwell, Deputy Commissioner Googaira, letter to Lt. Col. G.W. Hamilton, Commissioner and Superintendent, Mooltan Division, 23 June 1862, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 62.

[69] Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, letter to the Commissioners of Divisions. Cited in 'Abstract of Opinions Regarding Vernacular of the Courts', Lahore, 21 Feb. 1863, NAI, Home, Education, No. 30, Sept. 1876.

The correspondence from the early 1860s, from which colonial philological attitudes can be adduced, illuminates another reason why Urdu was favoured: it was seen as the language of native elites, a class the colonial state fostered to serve as its intermediaries with its subjects at large. In the Punjab, the state identified the region's indigenous rural elite—the 'Punjab Chiefs'—as bulwarks of its power.[70] In return, the colonial state buttressed the power of these individuals through honorary titles and, more importantly, land grants. The Punjab language policy was part of this broader political equation, as colonial officials deemed Urdu the language of the elite. 'If Punjabee is declared the Court language,' wrote one official, 'what is to become of the Chiefs who almost universally speak very fair Oordoo and the more educated classes who really cannot speak the veritable Punjabee?'[71] The interests of this native elite—both the 'chiefs' and the 'educated classes' in colonial parlance—surface repeatedly in considerations of language policy. Consider the words of the Commissioner of Rawalpindi, Arthur Brandreth, who argued that 'nothing would be gained by substituting Punjabee for the Urdu. If this were done it would be a retrograde proceeding', particularly because 'Urdu is the language of the educated classes'.[72]

Whether Urdu really was the language of the Punjab's indigenous elite is an open question. Colonial linguistic data cited above suggest not, as does an 1855 dispatch from the Court of Directors that states that 'Urdu [should] be made familiar, in the first instance, to the educated classes, and through them, as would certainly follow, to the entire body of the people, to the eventual supersession of inferior dialects'.[73] Nonetheless, it appears that officials in the Punjab insisted that Urdu was the language of the native elites, and that they saw its promotion as a way to protect elite interests.

It seems, then, that the colonial state's decision to use Urdu as the official vernacular language in the Punjab can be explained by a combination of factors: its desires to tap a cadre of experienced administrative personnel, facilitate Punjab's integration into Company territories, and support the native intermediaries of its rule, along with its fears of a Sikh resurgence and its attitude towards Punjabi as a language. Some of these were undoubtedly at play at other times and places in India's colonial history. For example, in Bengal in 1837, concerns over a language's suitability for administrative purposes and the availability of qualified

---

[70] The colonial state understood the social structure of the Punjab as essentially tribal, and identified tribal chiefs as the region's elite. See Gilmartin, 'Customary Law and *Shari'at* in British Punjab'.

[71] P.S. Melvill, Commissioner and Superintendent, Delhi Division, letter to Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, 16 June 1862, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, pp. 66–67.

[72] Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, letter to the Commissioners of Divisions. Cited in 'Abstract of Opinions Regarding Vernacular of the Courts', Lahore, 21 Feb. 1863, NAI, Home, Education, No. 30, Sept. 1876.

[73] Cited in H.R. Mehta, *A History of the Growth and Development of Western Education in the Punjab*, p. 29.

personnel were raised to argue against using vernacular languages for administration. In Bengal these arguments failed, while in the Punjab the exact same ones prevailed, even though in both cases the political motivations were the same.

What do these different outcomes suggest for our understanding of the colonial state in India? An examination of language policy in these two contexts suggests the limits of imperial (all-India) ideology in dictating colonial policy. Political ideology prevailed when it could be accommodated by the exigencies of rule at the local level. Thus, although there were concerns about the efficacy of using vernacular languages in Bengal's courts, these were not grave enough to thwart the implementation of a language policy grounded in political ideals. In the Punjab, quite the opposite was true. There, the exigencies of local-level rule prevented the implementation of a language policy that embodied the political spirit of Act 29. The comparison reveals how provincial practices and exigencies of governance thwarted the political ideals that guided imperial language policy.

### *'Cust's Rule': Revisiting Punjab's Language Policy*

The opinions colonial officials offered on the Punjabi language in their correspondence were presented to the Punjab government in the context of a petition referred to as 'Cust's Rule'. The petition was presented to the Punjab government in 1862 by Judicial Commissioner Robert Needham Cust, and requested that the language of courts in Punjab's central districts be changed from Urdu to Punjabi. Cust's petition was given serious consideration, likely because he was one of the highest-ranking officials in the provincial government, but the Punjab government ultimately rejected it. Nevertheless, 'Cust's Rule' is a critical historical marker for two reasons. First, it shows the resilience of a particular set of political ideals in the colony, which inspired demands for vernacular languages as languages of state. Second, an analysis of 'Cust's Rule' further reinforces the argument that colonial policy reflected India-wide ideological positions only where such ideologies dovetailed with, or could be accommodated by, the contingencies of rule at the local level.

Cust joined the Company in 1843 and served it for almost a quarter of a century, most of which he spent in the Punjab.[74] In addition to his vocation as a civil servant, Cust was an avid enthusiast of philology.[75] It is likely this latter interest, in conjunction with his years of service in the Punjab and political ideals about just and legitimate government, which led him to petition the Punjab government to reconsider its language policy. Cust argued that the Punjab's policy was flawed because it insisted 'on the court language being different from the language in

---

[74] Cust, *Memoirs of the Past Years of a Septuagenarian*.

[75] Cust's passion for languages and philology is apparent in his fluency in at least 10 languages (including Sanskrit, Hindustani, Persian, Arabic, Bengali and Punjabi). He published numerous essays and volumes on linguistic topics, including *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies* and *Linguistic and Oriental Essays*.

ordinary use in the district'. He contended that this situation 'merited disrepute' and caused the government to 'fall in public estimation'. Cust proposed that to remedy this situation Punjabi be made the vernacular of the central districts' courts.[76]

On receiving Cust's petition, the Punjab government asked district commissioners in Punjab's central districts for their opinions. Their overwhelming response was that Punjabi should not be introduced as the court language, even as they documented that it was the only language spoken in their respective districts. For example, the Deputy Commissioner of Jhang conceded, 'Punjabee is the only language in general use in the district'.[77] Indeed, the Punjab government conceded this point in its official rejoinder to Cust:

> Although it is unnecessary to alter the present court language, it is evident . . . that Urdu is not yet thoroughly understood in many parts of the Punjab. And this fact makes it of the greatest consequence that judicial officers should take pains to familiarize themselves with the dialects of the districts in which they are placed'.[78]

With this rejoinder, 'Cust's Rule' was rejected and Urdu was retained.

Cust's proposal, as his own language underscores, was grounded in political ideals. A government inaccessible to its subjects and unable to communicate its aims ultimately could not touch the people, and therefore could not inform the transformations of subjectivity that colonial rule itself was predicated on. Such a government 'merited disrepute'. Although the Punjab government was unwilling to change its policy, it is evident that it did not entirely disagree with Cust. Its rejoinder, after all, points out that Urdu was not widely understood in the Punjab. Colonial language policy in the Punjab would thus take a two-tiered approach: on one hand, Urdu was the region's official administrative language and would serve as the language of record in courts and in all provincial arms of administration. On the other hand, given that Urdu was not widely understood, Punjabi would also play an important, if unofficial, role in administration. Colonial personnel would have to learn Punjabi (referred to in government correspondence as 'the dialects of the districts') if they were to carry out the aims of government, and it appears that this is precisely what the officers did.[79] By the end of the nineteenth

---

[76] Judicial Commissioner of the Punjab, letter to the Secretary to the Government of the Punjab (No. 318), 2 June 1862, NAI, Home, Education, No. 30, Sept. 1876. Cust called for Punjabi to be made the official language of the courts in the Trans-Sutlej, Lahore and Amritsar districts.

[77] M.B. Jones, Officiating Deputy Commissioner, Jhang, letter to Commissioner and Superintendent, Mooltan Division, 24 June 1862, in Chaudhry, *The Development of Urdu*, p. 58.

[78] Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, letter to the Judicial Commissioner of the Punjab, Lahore, 10 Feb. 1863, NAI, Home, Education, No. 30, Sept. 1876.

[79] The colonial record shows, for example, that in both the Police and Education Departments, Punjabi was considered necessary for service. For the Police Department, see NAI, Home, Public, Nos 67–68, 7 Aug. 1869; for the Education Department, see W.R.M. Holroyd, Director of Public

century, members of the Punjab civil service were being tested for colloquial fluency in Punjabi.[80] But colonial language policy was never changed to reflect this, and instead Urdu remained the official language for the rest of the colonial period. Indeed, it remains the official language of Pakistani Punjab to this day.

### The Consequences of Colonial Language Policy in the Punjab

The case presented thus far points to the limits to colonial language policy: Urdu never became the (sole) language of government affairs in the Punjab, and throughout the late nineteenth century colonial officials conceded that Punjabi was the region's vernacular. The institution of Urdu as the official language did not, as some officials had expected, lead the region's inhabitants to adopt it as their vernacular. However, it would misrepresent important aspects of the region's colonial history to suggest that language policy had little effect on the Punjab due to the obvious limits of these colonial designs. The state's language policy did have a discernible impact on Punjabi society. Perhaps most significantly, throughout the late nineteenth century (and indeed through the early twentieth century and to this day in west Punjab), the overwhelming choice of vernacular language for printed discourse in Punjab's incipient public sphere was Urdu.

### *Publishing in Late Nineteenth-Century Punjab*

The American Presbyterian Mission in Ludhiana established the first printing press in the Punjab in 1836.[81] This did not spur a revolution in indigenous publishing, however. It would be almost 15 years before the first vernacular press, the Kohinoor Press, was established in the Punjab, and this occurred only with the active support of the newly-established colonial government.[82] The printing era initiated in the region through missionary and government patronage slowly gained momentum throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, and indigenous and independent presses were established in Lahore and Amritsar, and in smaller cities such as Multan, Sialkot, Jhelum and Rawalpindi. Urdu was far and away

---

Instruction, Punjab, letter to T.H. Thornton, Secretary to Government, Punjab, 21 Mar. 1870, Punjab Provincial Archives, Chandigarh (PPAC), Education, Science, and Art Department Proceedings, No. 6, Mar. 1870.

[80] H.J. Maynard, Judicial and General Secretary to the Government of the Punjab, letter to the Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, 31 July 1899, NAI, Home Department, Examinations, No. 3, Oct. 1899. This document records that the Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab no longer thought a colloquial test sufficient, and petitioned the Government of India to sanction 'a more severe test, both literary and colloquial' for officers serving in the Lahore, Jullundur and Rawalpindi divisions. His request was denied.

[81] Shaw, 'The First Printing Press in the Panjab'.

[82] The Punjab government solicited Hursookh Rai, a printer from the NWP, to move to the Punjab and launch the press. Singh, 'Newspapers, Politics and Literature', p. 401.

the most popular language of newspaper publishing. For example, of the 13 most important newspapers and periodicals published in the Punjab in 1876, seven were in Urdu, four in English, and two in Arabic.[83] In 1883, 11 of the 13 vernacular newspapers reported as published in Lahore were in Urdu.[84] This overwhelming dominance of the Urdu Press was the norm throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century.[85] By 1901, the number of vernacular newspapers and periodicals in the province had burgeoned to 186, of which 137 were published in Urdu.[86]

Newspapers were not the only form of print disseminated in Punjabi society—with the advent of printing houses came the publication of books. Unfortunately, we have no reliable records of book publication prior to those produced following Act No. 25 of 1867, which required all publications to be registered with the government. Although the comprehensiveness of these reports is questionable, they reveal that books were published in a plethora of languages. Between 1867 and 1896, colonial reports reveal books published in Arabic, Hindi, Kashmiri, Marwari, Pahari, Pashto, Persian, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Sindhi and Urdu. Despite this variety, Urdu publications greatly outnumbered those in any other language.

If Urdu was not the vernacular of the region, what accounts for its preponderance here? Pre-colonial sources suggest that Urdu had a negligible presence in the Punjab. As was the case in much of north India, Persian served as the region's language of letters, and it was also the principal language for the production of histories, memoirs and court chronicles.[87] If one changes genres and examines pre-colonial newspapers or proto-newspapers in the province, those produced in the years immediately preceding annexation were also published in Persian.[88] In pre-colonial Punjab, then, as in much of pre-colonial north India, Persian served as both the administrative and literary language. In the late nineteenth century, indigenous practice changed and Urdu came to dominate print culture.

---

[83] *Ibid.*, p. 402. Though Singh does not give the titles of the Arabic newspapers, they were likely organs of Muslim socio-religious reform organisations, many of which were active in the Punjab during this period.

[84] 'Report on Vernacular Newspapers Published in the Punjab During 1883', in NAI, Home, Public Proceedings, Nos 14–15B, June 1884.

[85] Based on information tabulated from 'Selections from the Vernacular Press' between 1880–1905, Barrier and Wallace show that of the 413 periodicals published in the Punjab during that period, 343, or about 82 per cent, were in Urdu. See *The Punjab Press 1880–1905*, p. 159.

[86] Singh, 'Newspapers, Politics and Literature', p. 402.

[87] All of the histories produced in early nineteenth-century Punjab were in Persian. These include: Khush-Waqt Ray's *Ahwal-e-Firqah-e-Sikhan* (written at the request of Colonel David Ochterlony, ca. early nineteenth century); Diwan Amar Nath's *Zafarnama-e-Ranjit Singh* (ca. 1830s); Bute Shah's *Tarikh-e-Punjab* (written at the suggestion of the political agent at Ludhiana, ca. 1842); Sohan Lal Suri's *Umdat ut-Tawarikh* (ca. 1830s) and *Ibratnama* (ca. 1840s); and Ganesh Das' *Char Bagh-e-Panjab* (presented by the author to Henry Lawrence, 1849). These texts, among others, are cited with brief descriptions in Malik, *The History of the Punjab 1799–1947*, pp. 681–93.

[88] Shaw, 'The Parameters of Publishing in Nineteenth-Century North India'.

*Patronage for Urdu*

The question I am interested in pursuing is why Urdu became the principal language of certain genres of literature and print in colonial Punjab when it formerly had a negligible presence. One important element to consider is the disruptions in the literary culture of Delhi (and Lucknow) caused by the colonial response to the Rebellion of 1857–58. In analysing that literary culture, and specifically the *ustad-shahgird* (teacher-disciple) patronage system that sustained the literary vitality of Delhi, Frances Pritchett writes, 'the aftermath of 1857 . . . destroyed the patronage system—and in fact the whole [Urdu literary] culture'.[89] With the demise of Delhi as a site of Urdu patronage, Lahore became an important centre of Urdu literary culture as Urdu poets and men of letters—the influential poet Altaf Husain Hali, among others—migrated there in search of patronage.

Notwithstanding the important cultural implications of 1858, I argue that it is the colonial state's language policy that ultimately explains why Urdu became the predominant language of Punjab's late nineteenth-century print culture. The state not only instituted Urdu as the official language of administration at the provincial level, but was also an active patron of Urdu literature. Indeed, Lahore became a 'resort of the exiled men of letters' from Delhi, largely because the provincial government was based there, and it was often with the colonial state that men like Hali found employment.[90] The Punjab's Education Department, in particular, took on the role of literary patron.

After all, to promote literature in the vernaculars had been one of the briefs of the Education Committee, an all-India body established in 1854, and later known as the Education Department. 'The almost total absence of a Vernacular literature,' lamented the Committee in its First Annual Report, meant 'the consequent impossibility of obtaining a tolerable education from that source alone'.[91] Because it had been decided that mass education, the Committee's charge, would be conducted in vernacular languages (despite the Anglicists' defeat of the Orientalists in debates about Indian education),[92] the Committee announced, 'We conceive the formation of a Vernacular literature to be the ultimate object to which all our efforts must be directed'.[93]

As the Committee's comments illustrate, officials saw the availability of vernacular texts as critical to colonial efforts in education. The Punjab Education Department was thus required to promote the production of materials in Urdu because Urdu, as the official vernacular in the region, was also the vernacular

---

[89] Pritchett, 'Urdu Literary Culture, Part 2', p. 905. Also see Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, Chs. 1–2.

[90] Hali was employed at the Government Book Depot in Lahore, where he revised translations of English books into Urdu for the Education Department. Saksena, *A History of Urdu Literature*, p. 234. See also Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness*, Ch. 3.

[91] Cited in Mahmood, *A History of English Education in India*, p. 57.

[92] Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*.

[93] Cited in Mahmood, *A History of English Education in India*, p. 57.

language of state-sponsored education.[94] Promotional devices included rewards for composing commendable works, the creation of textbook committees that oversaw the production of school books, hiring translators, publishing and translating works suited for use in schools, and subscribing to Urdu newspapers of various descriptions.[95] The impact of these activities should not be underestimated; once Urdu was designated the official language, state institutions were mobilised to promote it. The Punjab government thus became a patron of Urdu, and both commissioned and purchased works.[96]

By instituting Urdu as the vernacular of state institutions, financially supporting Urdu periodicals, and contributing towards the growth of Urdu literature through patronage, the state was instrumental in causing a shift in the practices of the Punjab's indigenous literati. There, as in the NWP, Urdu replaced Persian as the language of letters. The extent of this shift can be gauged by the production of memoirs and indigenous histories not commissioned by the state, hitherto composed in Persian, now in Urdu. This is readily apparent from a perusal of prominent works from this era, such as Noor Ahmed Chishti's *Yadgar-e Chishti* (1854) and *Tahqiqaat-e Chishti* (1996 [1867]), Kanhayalal's *Tarikh-e Lahor* (1990 [c. 1871]), and Mufti Ghulam Sarwar's *Tarikh-e Makhzan-e Punjab* (1996 [1884]).

### The Resilience of Punjabi Cultural Production

The designation of Urdu as the official language in colonial Punjab had far-reaching consequences. But how Urdu was privileged in official arenas, and how, as a result, it became central to certain indigenous arenas of literary production, is only one part of a complex tale. Despite Urdu's official status and its dominance in the

---

[94] The Punjab Education Department was created on 1 Jan. 1856. William Arnold, the Punjab's first Director of Public Instruction and head of this department, stated in his first report: 'It was resolved from the first to make the Urdu language and the Persian alphabet the one language and one alphabet in Government schools' (cited in *The Beginnings of Western Education in the Punjab*, p. 7). The situation in the Punjab, where the primary provincial vernacular enjoyed (at best) a marginal position in the provincial education system, was unique in British India. It was not unique, however, in the British Empire. Irish, for example, was entirely absent from the state-sponsored education programme initiated in Ireland in 1831. It was included in the school curriculum only in 1878 after sustained agitation. See Ó Buachalla, 'Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831–1981'.

[95] Lepel Griffin, Under-Secretary to Government, Punjab, letter to the Secretary to Government of India, Home Department, Lahore, 20 Oct. 1870, PPAC, Education, Science and Art Department Proceedings, No. 5, Mar. 1870.

[96] The colonial state promoted Urdu literature in the Punjab through more than the Education Department. For example, district commissioners commissioned local histories in the late nineteenth century. These works, such as the *Tarikh-e Jhelum* and the *Tarikh-e Zilla Montgomery*, were composed in Urdu. There is little doubt that prior to the institution of a colonial language policy that privileged Urdu, these works would have been composed in Persian. Their titles, representing the Persian genre of *tarikh*, or history writing, make this apparent. Indeed, the contrast with early nineteenth-century histories (note 87) is striking, particularly given that many of the earlier histories, too, were produced under colonial patronage.

Punjab's incipient public sphere, Punjabi continued to function in a parallel arena of cultural production throughout the late nineteenth century. The sites, institutions and patrons of Punjabi cultural and literary production all lay outside colonial control, and the language therefore remained at the margins of colonial discourse. Nevertheless, cultural production in Punjabi was central to the experience of the region's inhabitants. Even a cursory examination of late nineteenth-century Punjabi-language performance traditions and literary production, or Punjabis' colloquial language makes this evident.

In late nineteenth-century Punjab, activities such as *sang* (theatre), *dastangoh* (storytelling), or public performances by *Mirasi*s (hereditary musicians) were ubiquitous. In his history of Lahore during this period, for example, Syed Muhammad Latif wrote, 'young people in the streets recite epic and other poetry, or sing songs descriptive of love and intrigue'.[97] Such fragments of information abound, but documenting the performance, social and cultural contexts of such practices in any detail is made complicated by a dearth of sources, indigenous sources in particular. Performance traditions did pique the curiosity of colonial officials, however, who documented them while gathering information for gazetteers (and similar colonial publications), and for their study of folklore and folk practices. The latter interest produced books such as R.C. Temple's *Legends of the Punjab* (1884), Flora Annie Steel's *Tales of the Punjab Told by the People* (1894), and Charles Swynnerton's *Romantic Tales From the Panjab* (1903). Though each of these works is deeply steeped in Victorian conceptions of folklore that served more to compare Punjabi practices to imagined universal norms than to study Punjabi practices in their own right, they nonetheless document for us the fact that the public telling of Punjabi texts, both with and without musical accompaniment, was an ingrained aspect of Punjabi social and cultural life. Indeed, Temple tells us that 'in the Punjab the folktale is abundant everywhere. It lives in every village and hamlet, in every nursery and zenana'.[98] Temple's careful notes to each Punjabi text translated in his *Legends* importantly point to the texts' performance, and alert us to the contemporary active circulation and dissemination of Punjabi texts through hereditary musicians' performances, and through indigenous theatre performances.[99] Analysis of the information provided by Temple and others also reveals that while such performances were forms of entertainment and pleasure, they were also sites for the articulation of social relations.[100]

In addition to Punjabi texts' oral circulation in both rural and urban settings as aspects of social and cultural life,[101] there was a vibrant Punjabi book trade in the

[97] Latif, *Lahore*, p. 267.

[98] Temple, *Legends of the Panjab, Vol. 1*, p. vii.

[99] BL, OIOC, ms. EUR/F98/4a.

[100] See Mir, *The Social Space of Language*, Ch. 2.

[101] While Temple's, Steel's, and Swynnerton's texts underscore the circulation of Punjabi texts in rural settings, J.C. Oman's reflections on life in late nineteenth-century Lahore point to Punjabi storytelling and theatre in an urban context. See his *Cults, Customs and Superstitions of India*, pp. 191–206.

late nineteenth century. While Punjabi publishing got off to something of a slow start—in the latter half of 1867 (the first year for which publishing information is available), there were 12 Punjabi titles registered in Lahore—by 1876 the number of Punjabi titles had increased almost 10-fold. By 1887, there was nearly a 40-fold increase to 473 titles.[102] What these statistics mask, however, is the actual number of Punjabi books circulating in the region, for each one of these titles had a publication run of anywhere from 100 to 2,400 copies, and some texts were published in multiple editions. Without an exact record one can only hypothesise about numbers, but the print runs suggest that the number of Punjabi books circulated into the market in the late nineteenth century, particularly its latter decades, was sizable. This should not be surprising, however, as most of the Punjabi titles published in the late nineteenth century were meant for oral recitation, and colonial records indicate that Punjabi remained the regional vernacular despite colonial prognostications of its demise.[103]

It is beyond the scope of this article to examine Punjabi cultural and literary traditions on their own terms.[104] It is nevertheless important to recognise that the vitality of Punjabi-language traditions—indeed, of the language itself—marks a kind of limit to colonial power. This has led some scholars to frame Punjabi cultural and literary production as 'resistance' to colonial rule.[105] To do so overlooks two critical points, however. One is that the colonial state, by privileging Urdu over Punjabi, allowed Punjabi cultural production a space to develop with relative autonomy from colonial interference. The other is that to understand colonial-era Punjabi cultural and literary production as simply a response to colonial rule or language policy is to elide the vitality of that linguistic tradition.

## Conclusion

This article has examined three interrelated themes in the study of colonialism: the choice of official language as critical to the articulation of liberalism in colonial contexts; the tension between imperial ideology and local contingencies of

---

[102] 'Catalogue of Books Printed in the Punjab During the Quarter ending 30th September 1867', in NAI, Home, Public, Nos 112–20, 11 Apr. 1868; 'Catalogue of Books Printed in the Punjab During the Quarter ending 31st Dec. 1867', in NAI, Home, Public, Nos 112–20, 11 Apr. 1868; 'Analysis of Publications in the Punjab during the Calendar Year 1876 Under Act XXV of 1876', in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India No. 143*; 'Publication Issued and Published in 1887', in *Selections from the Records of the Government of India No. 247.*

[103] The 1881 census shows that an overwhelming majority of individuals in central and southern Punjab returned Punjabi as their vernacular. The exact figures by district are: Amritsar, 96 per cent; Dera Ismail Khan, Punjabi 65 per cent; Jatki (a dialect of Punjabi) 20 per cent; Ferozepur, 97 per cent; Gujrat, 99 per cent; Gurdaspur, 86 per cent; Lahore, 96 per cent; Ludhiana, 98 per cent; Statistics based on Table IX of the Census Report of 1881. Cited in *Punjab District Gazetteers, 1883–1884* [various districts].

[104] See Mir, *The Social Space of Language*.

[105] Shafqat Tanveer Mirza, for example, is one of many scholars who frame Punjabi literature in this way. See his *Resistance Themes in Punjabi Literature.*

colonial rule; and the extent and limits of colonial power. I have argued that the study of colonial language policy offers a prism through which to explore these larger themes and provides insights into the nature of colonialism. My analysis of colonial language policy in nineteenth-century British India reveals that colonial officials, whether based in London, Calcutta, or at the local level, saw vernacular languages as critical to an effective and just government. They argued that if rule was to be just, then local government had to be conducted in a language their subjects understood. This became a generalised principle in much of Britain's Indian empire from the 1830s onward. The Punjab's language policy was unique in its disregard for this principle, and it was the only province in British India where the language of local administration was not a regional vernacular.

In closing, I would like to suggest some implications of this argument that may help broaden our perspective on an important twentieth century issue in Indian history: the Indian National Congress' demand for a linguistic reorganisation of states in the late-colonial period, and its execution of that reorganisation in the decades after independence. While I need not detail the history of the linguistic reorganisation movement here, it is important to note, first, that the idea that India's administrative units should dovetail with its linguistic map was adopted as a principle by the Indian National Congress in 1920, and second, that in 1921 the Congress was reorganised into Provincial Congress Committees which broadly represented linguistic units.[106] In the aftermath of independence, India's administrative units were redrawn (despite Nehru's hesitations) to better reflect linguistic groups.[107] 'The most significant result of linguistic reorganisation,' Sanjib Baruah writes, 'was that it created states where particular nationalities—speakers of particular languages with established literatures and histories—constituted majorities capable of defining the public identities of the states.'[108] Baruah's statement highlights the dominant theoretical paradigm through which linguistic organisation in India has been understood—nationalism.

[106] For a detailed history of the linguistic reorganisation movement, see King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*.

[107] It is ironic that in this regard, too, Punjab was an exceptional case. In 1956, Nehru conceded the linguistic reorganisation of India's states, *except* Punjab. The reason for this, Paul Brass has convincingly argued in *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, is that in the Punjab, Nehru faced the thorny problem of religious identity (in this case, Sikhism) mapping on to linguistic identity (Punjabi). The Punjabi *suba* advocated on linguistic grounds would also have been a predominantly Sikh state with a significant Hindu minority. The demands for a Punjabi state were thus interpreted as (or feared to be) based on religious identity, though couched in the language of linguistic identity (had Punjabi been designated an official language in the colonial period, the postcolonial government's position would have been difficult to maintain). Linguistic reorganisation was extended to the Punjab (in 1966 and, incidentally, after Nehru's death) only after sustained agitation and with the already truncated state further divided into three states (Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Punjab).

[108] Baruah, *India Against Itself*, p. 98.

The link between language and nation is obviously an important one, and a voluminous body of scholarship continues to be produced on this important relationship.[109] Its roots can surely be traced to the nineteenth century and the nationalist discourses and movements that profoundly shook Europe during that century. Scholars have viewed this nineteenth-century history of nationalism as the foremost, if not the sole, impetus for both pre- and post-independence Indian demands that internal political boundaries be changed to reflect linguistic communities. Robert D. King, for example, argues in his book *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, 'the belief that political boundaries should coincide with linguistic boundaries . . . is ultimately a product of nineteenth-century nationalism', and that, 'the conception that . . . one language imposed for official purposes upon peoples who normally spoke other languages . . . changed rapidly with the ascendancy of nationalism' (p. 25). Surely, theories of nationalism, and linguistic nationalism in particular, help account for Congress' championing the cause of linguistic reorganisation in the late colonial period. The arguments and evidence provided in this article, however, suggest that other intellectual genealogies are also relevant.

As we have seen, the idea that people should be governed by and through their own (spoken) language circulated in India's official circles from the early nineteenth century onward. This idea, I have argued, was grounded in ideas of effective, just and legitimate government, concepts based in both utilitarian and liberal political thought. As we know from the scholarship of Eric Stokes, Gauri Viswanathan, Thomas Metcalf, Uday Singh Mehta and others, the articulation of utilitarianism and liberalism in India was far removed from any notion of Indian political self-assertion.[110] Certainly the actions of those colonial officials who championed the cause of India's vernaculars as languages of provincial government were grounded in a belief that this was the best way to penetrate Indian society and to produce the desired effects of colonial governance, ranging from the extraction of maximum benefits from the economy to effecting moral change in Indian subjects. The confluence of vernacular language and governance as imagined in colonial ideology dovetail ironically with the ideas of linguistic nationalism that proved so influential in Indian nationalism (or subnationalism, according to Baruah), and which largely account for the current borders of India's states.[111] Despite the gulf that separates them, then, the intentions of these colonial officials and the policies of India's late-colonial nationalist leaders are historically linked.

---

[109] The scholarship on language and nationalism is too broad to cite here in any comprehensive way. Two important texts that continue to influence scholars include Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, and Eric Hobsbawm's *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*.

[110] Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India*; Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*; Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*; Mehta, *Empire and Liberalism*.

[111] Baruah, *India Against Itself*.

# Bibliography

## Primary Sources

British Library, London, Oriental and India Office Collections.
      Board of Control Records, 1784–1858 (F series)
      East India Company: General Correspondence, 1602–1859 (E series)
      India Office Records Official Publications Series, c. 1760–1957 (V series)
      European Manuscripts
National Archives of India, New Delhi.
      Foreign Department Proceedings
      Home Department Proceedings
Punjab Provincial Archives, Chandigarh.
      Education, Science, and Art Department Proceedings

## References

Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*, London, 1983.

Barrier, N.G. and P. Wallace. *The Punjab Press 1880–1905*, East Lansing, MI, 1970.

Baruah, Sanjib. *India Against Itself: Assam and the Politics of Nationality*, Philadelphia, 1999.

Bayly, C.A. *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870*, Cambridge, 1996.

Blackburn, Stuart. *Print, Folklore, and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, Delhi, 2003.

Brass, Paul. *Language, Religion and Politics in North India*, New York, 1974.

Brutt-Griffler, Janina. 'Class, Ethnicity, and Language Rights: An Analysis of British Colonial Policy in Lesotho and Sri Lanka and Some Implications for Language Policy', *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education*, Vol. 1 (3), 2002, pp. 207–34.

Carey, William. *A Grammar of the Punjaubee Language*, Serampore, 1812.

Chaudhry, Nazir Ahmad. comp., *The Development of Urdu as Official Language in the Punjab (1849–1974)*, Lahore, 1977.

Chishti, Noor Ahmed. *Yadgar-e Chishti*, Lahore, 1854.

———. *Tahqiqaat-e Chishti: Tarikh-e Lahor ka Encyclopedia*, Lahore, 1996 [1867].

Cohn, Bernard. 'Representing Authority in Victorian India', in Bernard Cohn, *An Anthropologist Among the Historians and Other Essays*, Delhi, 1987, pp. 632–82.

———. 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command', in Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, Delhi, 1997 [1992], pp. 16–56.

Comaroff, Jean and John Comaroff. *Of Revelation and Revolution, Vol. 1*, Chicago, 1991.

Cust, Robert Needham. *A Sketch of the Modern Languages of the East Indies,* London, 1878.

———. *Memoirs of the Past Years of a Septuagenarian,* London, 1899.

———. *Linguistic and Oriental Essays: Written from the Year 1840–1903*, 7 vols, London, 1880–1904.

Dalmia, Vasudha. *The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions*, Delhi, 1997.

Fabian, Johannes. *Language and Colonial Power: The Appropriation of Swahili in the Former Belgian Congo 1880–1938*, New York, 1986.

Gilmartin, David. 'Customary Law and *Shari'at* in British Punjab', in Katherine P. Ewing, ed., *Shari'at and Ambiguity in South Asian Islam*, Berkeley, 1988, pp. 43–62.

Grierson, George. *Grierson on Panjabi* [*Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. VIII, part 1 and Vol. IX, part 1, Delhi, 1919], Patiala, 1993.

Hobsbawm, Eric. *Nations and Nationalism since 1780*, Cambridge, 1990.

Jones, Kenneth. *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19ᵗʰ-Century Punjab*, Berkeley, 1976.

Kanhayalal. *Tarikh-e Lahor*, Lahore, 1990 [c. 1871].

King, Christopher. *One Language, Two Scripts: The Hindi Movement in Nineteenth-Century North India*, New Delhi, 1994.

King, Robert, D. *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, Delhi, 1997.

Latif, Syed Muhammad. *Lahore: Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities*, Lahore, 1994 [1892].

Lowell, A.L. *Colonial Civil Service*, New York, 1900.

Mahmood, Syed. *A History of English Education in India*, Aligarh, 1895.

Malik, Ikram Ali. *The History of the Punjab 1799–1947*, Delhi, 1993 [1970].

Mehta, H.R. *A History of the Growth and Development of Western Education in the Punjab 1846–84*, Delhi, 1987 [1929].

Mehta, Uday Singh. *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought*, Chicago, 1999.

Metcalf, Thomas R. *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge, 1995.

Mir, Farina. *The Social Space of Language: Punjabi Popular Narrative in Colonial India, c. 1850–1900,* Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 2002.

Mirza, Shafqat Tanveer. *Resistance Themes in Punjabi Literature*, Lahore, 1992.

Neild-Basu, Susan. 'The Dubashes of Madras', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 18 (1), 1984, pp. 1–31.

Ó Buachalla, Seamus. 'Educational Policy and the Role of the Irish Language from 1831–1981', *European Journal of Education*, Vol. 19 (1), 1984, pp. 75–92.

Oman, J.C. *Cults, Customs and Superstitions of India*, Rev. ed., London, 1908 [1889].

Perry, Adele. 'The State of Empire: Reproducing Colonialism in British Columbia, 1849–1871', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, Vol. 2 (2), 2001. http://muse.jhu.edu/cgi-bin/access.cgi?uri=/journals/journal_of_colonialism_and_colonial_history/v002/2.2perry.html.

Potts, E. Daniel. *British Baptist Missionaries in India, 1793–1837*, Cambridge, 1967.

Pritchett, Frances. *Nets of Awareness*, Berkeley, 1994.

———. 'Urdu Literary Culture, Part 2', in Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History*, Berkeley, 2003, pp. 864–911.

*Punjab District Gazetteers, 1883–1884*, Lahore, various dates.

Saksena, Ram Babu. *A History of Urdu Literature*, Lahore, 1996 [1927].

Sarwar, Mufti Ghulam. *Tarikh-e Makhzan-e Punjab*, Lahore, 1996 [1884].

*Selections from the Records of the Government of India No. 143*, Calcutta, n.d.

*Selections from the Records of the Government of India No. 247*, Calcutta, n.d.

*Seventh Memoir Respecting the Translations of the Sacred Scriptures into the Languages of India, Conducted by the Brethren at Serampore*, London, 1822.

Shaw, Graham. 'The First Printing Press in the Panjab', *The Library Chronicle*, Vol. 43, 1979, pp. 159–79.

———. 'The Parameters of Publishing in Nineteenth-Century North India: A Study Based Loosely on Delhi', paper presented at the New Literary Histories for the Nineteenth Century Workshop, University of California, Berkeley, 17 Sept. 1999.

Singh, Nazar. 'Newspapers, Politics and Literature in Nineteenth-Century Delhi and Punjab', *The Panjab Past and Present,* Vol. 24, 1990, pp. 392–407.

Srivastava, Ramesh. *Development of Judicial System in India under the East India Company 1833–1858*, Lucknow, 1971.

Steel, Flora Annie. *Tales of the Punjab Told by the People*, New Delhi, 1989 [1894].

Stokes, Eric. *The English Utilitarians and India*, Oxford, 1959.

Swynnerton, Charles. *Romantic Tales From the Panjab*, London, 1903.

Temple, R.C. *The Legends of the Panjab*, 2 vols, Islamabad, n.d. [1884].

*The Beginnings of Western Education in the Punjab: Mr. Arnold's Report on Public Instruction for the year 1856–57*, Lahore, n.d.

Trautmann, Thomas R. *Aryans and British India*, Berkeley, 1997.

Viswanathan, Gauri. *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India*, New York, 1989.